DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 123 914 FL 007 736

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TITLE Designing a Non-Remedial Freshman Composition Course for Mexican-Americans.
PUB DATE Jan 76
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Conference on College English and the Mexican-American (Pan-American University, January 22-24, 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Bilingual Students; *College Curriculum; College Freshmen; *Composition (Literary); Course Content; *Course Descriptions; *English Curriculum; English Instruction; Higher Education; *Mexican Americans

ABSTRACT

This paper briefly examines the viability and potential of a non-remedial college freshman composition course designed for those Mexican-American students who are capable of entering and successfully completing the regular freshman English class. The rhetorical concepts and skills of composition normally taught in Freshman English can more easily be taught using content which is potentially of more interest to the Mexican-American student. This paper offers a few examples of the way in which certain selected materials may be used to teach various types of composition. (Author/DB)

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"DESIGNING A NON-REMEDIAL FRESHMAN COMPOSITION COURSE FOR MEXICAN-AMERICANS"

Introduction

When educators talk about college English and the Mexican-American, they frequently conceptualize, if not verbalize, a remedial program of sorts. I do not intend to deny the importance of such remedial English programs, not only for Mexican-American students but for college students generally. We are all aware of the sharp drop in the overall literacy rate of students in recent years and the constant, yet legitimate, complaint of college teachers as to the lower caliber of students enrolled in freshman English. However, we should not automatically assume that every special program for Mexican-American students has to be remedial in nature.

This morning I would like to briefly comment on the viability and potential of a freshman English course for Mexican-American students that is not remedial in nature but that is designed for those Mexican-American students who are capable of entering and successfully completing the "regular" freshman English class--that is, those students who have achieved sufficient mastery of grammar, syntax, and paragraph

construction to allow them to concentrate on semantics and the modes and aims of discourse.

My interest in such a course began when I was an instructor in the English department at the University of Texas at Austin. With the approval of the English department and the financial backing of the Mexican-American Studies Center, I designed and taught for three consecutive years, from 1971 to 1974, a two-semester freshman English course for Mexican-American students. I felt the course to be quite successful. Carlotta Cardenas de Dwyer, one of our speakers later this morning, has continued the course the last two years and has experienced great success with the course.

Rationale

Freshman English is typically an interdisciplinary course intended to strengthen the student's skills in the area of rhetoric and composition. The course stresses the basic rhetorical concepts and compositional skills that a student needs to understand and master in order to improve both his thinking and writing. Included are the comprehension and application of such skills as paragraph transition, thematic organization, diction, tone, the different modes of discourse

(such as narration, description, evaluation, and classification) and the major aims of discourse (the expository, persuasive, literary, and expressive).

One of the major academic problems that entering Mexican-American college freshman students encounter is the high level of non-fiction prose which they are required to read in first semester freshman English. If the students are unable to fully comprehend or relate to what they read, they will have great difficulty grasping the basic rhetorical principles that the prose works exemplify. A thorough understanding of basic rhetorical principles is essential to clear thinking and effective writing. Indeed, much of the stereotypic writings by social scientists concerning the Mexican-American is largely due to the misuse or neglect of rhetorical principles essential to factual writing. Many of these writings by social scientists would not hold up to careful rhetorical analysis, as false assumptions, inference, sweeping generalizations, and material fallacies creep in to mar the scientific nature of the study.

It is my belief that the rhetorical concepts and skills of composition normally taught in freshman English can more easily be taught using content which is potentially of

more interest to the Mexican-American student. Such a course tries to use as many Mexican-American materials or experiences as possible to teach the same basic concepts needed by all freshman English students. This rationale can easily be applied to any English course with any level of student where writing skills or mental processes, not the specific content itself, are the main concern.

Course readings

In selecting readings for the course I attempted to find writings which met the following two criteria:

(1) it either exemplified certain rhetorical or compositional faults which act as barriers to clear thinking and effective writing

or

it exemplified specific rhetorical qualities or compositional techniques used to enhance clear thinking and effective writing

(2) it dealt with some aspect of the Mexican-American experience

Obviously, the latter criterion was not as important as the first. Though a lot of time and effort was spent perusing Mexican-American writings which met the first criterion, I was not always able to find a work which illustrated the exact skill or technique I wished to stress. Teaching the students to become better thinkers and writers was the foremost

consideration. I would like to emphasize that the course was neither designed nor taught, nor is it presently being taught, nor should it ever be taught, as an ethnic studies course per se.

Examples

Let me give some examples of the types of things we considered in the course. When studying diction we examined the different types of jargon. I included the following paragraph from the writing of a Mexican-American social scientist as an example of technical jargon:

> "This study is intended to introduce for consideration the premise that Chicano (or Mexican American) activities in all social spheres are a practical set of directed behavior patterns in terms of a heterogeneous ethnic satellite system with thrust and objectives emergin from, revolving around, and conveying at a collective focal point: LA RAZA."
>
> _____Deluvia Hernández, "La Raza Satellite System"

Tone was also studied as an essential aspect of writing. The following paragraph was used, for example, to illustrate "dripping irony":

> "Had Santa Anna lived in the twentieth century, he would have called the atrocities with which he is charged "war crimes trials." There is a fundamental difference, though, between his execution of Texas prisoners and the hangings of Japanese army officers like General Yamashita at the end of the Pacific War. Santa Anna usually was in a rage when he ordered his victims shot. The Japanese were never hanged without ceremony of a trial--a refinement, one must conclude, belonging to a more civilized age and a more enlightend people."
>
> _____ Américo Paredes, With His Pistol in His Hand

Or, when we got to expository writing and studied development by definition, I included excerpts from the essay "On Gringo, Greaser, and Other Neighborly Names" also by Dr. Paredes. As an example of exposition of process I used an excerpt from Ernesto Galarza's Barrio Boy which describes the process of making tamales. In teaching exposition by comparison and contrast I used a passage from Octavio Paz's The Labyrinth of Solitude in which the author contrasts the Mexican with the North American.

The study of persuasion as one of the four dominant aims of discourse proved to be very interesting as I used a local political speech delivered by one of the state representatives who was using scare tactics to question the qualifications of his challenger, a Mexican-American who had received strong support, primarily from the liberal vote. We analyzed the speech as a persuasive argument from the standpoint of the ethical, pathetic, and logical argument. We also examined the speech according to organizational and stylistic features characteristic of persuasive discourse.

In the study of the literary use of language we examined such works as José Montoya's "La Jefita" for its use of imagery, James K. Bowman's "El Patrón" for the use of flashback and foreshadowing, Nick Vaca's "Martín" for point of view and

irony, and Rudolfo Anaya's Bless Me, Ultima for the use of symbolism.

In summary, we need to make the course as relevant as possible by using materials and learning activities which have the potential of making for an exciting and meaningful course. The concepts and skills remain the same. Obviously, some students will get additional benefits from this course. Some will be exposed to Mexican-American writings for the first time and will enjoy the opportunity to read about and write on topics relating to their ethnic group. And some, students will not feel as inhibited as they may be in other classes.

Equality of educational opportunities for minority students should not be interpreted as a uniformity of curriculum and instructional approaches. We have found that the non-remedial freshman composition course for Mexican-Americans does work and can be exciting and motivating for both the student and the teacher.